

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Bonneville Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: Hilltop-Warner No. 1 Miles 3-7 Access Road Improvement Project

PP&A No.: 4,067

Project Manager: Darin Bowman, TELP-TPP-3

Location: Modoc County, California

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B 1.3 Routine Maintenance

Description of the Proposed Action: Bonneville Power Administration is planning on improving and reconstructing approximately 6 miles of existing access roads along the Hilltop – Warner No. 1 230-kilovolt (kV) high voltage transmission line in Modoc County, CA, in the U.S. Forest Service’s Modoc National Forest. Work would take place in line miles 3 through 7 of the transmission line as it runs from rural Hilltop Substation to Warner Substation located near the town of Alturas, California. The roads provide access to the transmission easement for planned transmission line maintenance, inspections, and emergency response, and require periodic work to ensure safe and reliable use.

The proposed improvements include regrading and blading followed by resurfacing the road with crushed, compacted rock. The existing road width of approximately 12 feet would be maintained. In addition to the road surface rock, water crossing features including water bars, drain dips, and cross drain culverts would be installed to facilitate ephemeral surface water flow across the roadway. No new roadway is proposed, and no in-water work or water crossing features in intermittent or perennial streams are planned. Construction vehicular traffic would be restricted to existing disturbed areas and road surfaces as much as possible to protect the local native vegetation, and disturbed soils would be stabilized with native grass seed and straw, or hydroseeded. Construction equipment would likely include a backhoe loader, dump truck, road roller and light duty trucks.

Findings: In accordance with Section 1021.410(b) of the Department of Energy’s (DOE) National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Regulations (57 FR 15144, Apr. 24, 1992, as amended at 61 FR 36221-36243, Jul. 9, 1996; 61 FR 64608, Dec. 6, 1996, 76 FR 63764, Nov. 14, 2011), BPA has determined that the proposed action:

- 1) fits within a class of actions listed in Appendix B of 10 CFR 1021, Subpart D (see attached Environmental Checklist);
- 2) does not present any extraordinary circumstances that may affect the significance of the environmental effects of the proposal; and
- 3) has not been segmented to meet the definition of a categorical exclusion.

Based on these determinations, BPA finds that the proposed action is categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

/s/ Aaron Siemers
Aaron Siemers, EPR-4
Environmental Protection Specialist

Concur:

/s/ Katey C. Grange Date: March 3, 2021
Katey C. Grange
NEPA Compliance Officer

Attachment(s): Environmental Checklist

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Checklist

This checklist documents environmental considerations for the proposed project and explains why the project would not have the potential to cause significant impacts on environmentally sensitive resources and would meet other integral elements of the applied categorical exclusion.

Proposed Action: Hilltop-Warner No. 1 Miles 3-7 Access Road Improvement Project

Project Site Description

The Hilltop-Warner No. 1 Miles 3-7 Access Road Improvement Project is located in northeastern California, within five miles of the town of Alturas, California. The majority of the project is located in the Klamath Juniper Woodland/Devils Garden ecoregion, with the southeastern segment located in the Pit River Valleys ecoregion. The Klamath Juniper Woodland/Devils Garden ecoregion is characterized by rolling hills and plateaus, with thin rocky soils. Vegetation consists of drought resistant western juniper, sagebrush, bitterbrush, and native grasses. The Pit River Valleys ecoregion is comprised of the low areas around the Pit River and its tributaries. Rattlesnake Creek, a tributary to the Pit River, runs to the south and southeast of the project area. Most of the land in this ecoregion has been converted to pasture, hay production, or cropland. The project area averages approximately 12 inches of precipitation a year and is on average around 1500 ft. in elevation.

The majority of the planned project is located in the southern extent of Modoc National Forest, managed by the U.S. Forest Service. A small eastern and southeastern segment of the project is managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and private landowners. In the vicinity of the planned project area, the terrain is generally flat, before dropping off into the Rattlesnake Creek river valley to the southeast of the planned road work. Indian Spring Reservoir is present approximately 0.5 miles to the south and the Lower Cummings Reservoir is approximately two miles southwest of the project area. The terrain is generally rocky, with thin, gravelly top soils and sporadic rock outcrops. The landscape is crisscrossed with several ephemeral drainages, but no perennial streams are present. The drainages channel water from winter and early spring rain fall events that, due to the thin soils, drain rather quickly, at times create flash-type stormwater events. Juniper, sage brush, and native and invasive grasses dominate the vegetation in the area.

BPA's high voltage Hilltop-Warner No. 1 transmission line and the existing access road are the primary structures in the project area. The transmission line is supported by wood pole H-frame structures. The cleared transmission right-of-way (ROW) in the project area is 100 feet wide. Vegetation in the ROW is periodically cut to promote low-growing plant species to maintain electrical clearances. The existing BPA access road, where the proposed work is planned, generally runs straight down the ROW, parallel to the transmission line, however road work is also planned on sections that trend outside the transmission ROW, and on the spur road that runs from Highway 299 near Alturas north to the transmission line.

The project location is detailed below:

Township	Range	Section
43N	12 E	Sec. 27
43N	12 E	Sec. 28
43N	12 E	Sec. 29
43N	12 E	Sec.34
43N	12 E	Sec. 35

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: BPA initiated consultation on December 27, 2018. Consulted parties include the Alturas Rancheria of Pit River Indians, the Cedarville Rancheria of Northern Paiute Indians, the Fort Bidwell Indian Community of Paiute, the Klamath Tribe, the Pit River Tribe of California, the Susanville Indian Rancheria, the Bureau of Land Management – Northern California District, the United States Forest Service –Modoc National Forest, and the California State Historic Preservation Office. On September 25, 2019, BPA conducted an intensive pedestrian survey of the Area of Potential Effect (APE).

Three previously-recorded cultural resource sites within the APE have previously been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The results of BPA's survey did not change those earlier determinations.

On January 15, 2021, BPA issued a determination of no adverse effect to historic properties as BPA would not conduct work within the cultural site boundaries. None of the consulted parties responded to BPA within the 30-day period, therefore, BPA's obligations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act have been fulfilled.

Notes:

- A BPA archaeologist would be onsite during the proposed road work to ensure that no staging or other work activities would take place within cultural site boundaries.
- The proposed activities would be limited to the existing road prism. Cultural site boundaries would be marked for "No Project Access" to prevent inadvertent impacts during construction.
- In the unlikely event that cultural material is inadvertently encountered during the implementation of this project, BPA will require that work be halted in the vicinity of the finds until they can be inspected

2. Geology and Soils

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The planned road improvements would occur on pre-existing, established road footprint. The area is very rocky and minimal blading would be conducted. Rock would be added to level the road surface. Staging areas and turn-around zones for construction activity would be established in previously disturbed areas.

Notes:

- Any disturbed soils incidental to construction would be stabilized with native seed and weed-free straw or other acceptable erosion and sediment control methods per District or Forest botanist recommendations.

3. Plants (including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)

Potential for Significance: No with Conditions

Explanation: Road construction with heavy machinery would potentially disturb some vegetation immediately adjacent to the existing road footprint. These areas would be reseeded with native grasses post-construction.

Road work would be completed in areas with abundant native vegetation such as sage brush and bitter brush.

BPA obtained an updated ESA-listed species list for the project on Jan. 14th, 2021. An effects determination was conducted for Greene's tuctoria and slender orcutt grass. BPA determined that the project would have "no effect" on ESA-listed plant species in the project area. In correspondence with USFS and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff regarding the planned project, the land managers did not express concerns regarding the presence of sensitive plant species in the work areas.

Notes:

- Construction activity on undisturbed areas vegetated with native plants would be limited as much as possible.
- To reduce the risk of introducing invasive weeds, all equipment will be cleaned thoroughly, with pressurized water, of dirt and weeds before entering and before departing National Forest System lands.

4. Wildlife (including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Construction on the project would likely disturb wildlife in the area due to the presence of humans and additional noise. However, disturbance would be temporary, and the Modoc National Forest provides ample habitat and cover for wildlife outside of the immediate project area.

BPA obtained an ESA-listed species list for the project on Jan. 14th, 2021. An effects determination was conducted for yellow-billed cuckoo. BPA determined that the project would have "no effect" on ESA-listed species in the project area. In correspondence with USFS and BLM staff regarding the planned project, the land managers did not express concerns regarding the presence of sensitive wildlife species in the work areas.

5. Water Bodies, Floodplains, and Fish (including Federal/state special-status species, ESUs, and habitats)

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project area is not located in or near a floodplain.

No perennial waterways or other waterbodies are present in the project area. Planned water features such as cross-drain culverts, waterbars and drain ditches are located in areas of ephemeral surface water flow. No in-water-work is planned, and therefore the project would not impact fish.

6. Wetlands

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No wetlands or vernal pools are present in the project area.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Excavation on the project would only include light grading and not involve depths that would intersect groundwater or aquifers.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Land use consists of public lands managed by the USFS and BLM for recreation and wildlife habitat. There are no specially designated areas nearby. Private land use consists of lands maintained as open juniper and sagebrush habitat. The project would not impact existing land use.

9. Visual Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: No large trees would be removed during construction. The road grading and addition of rock would be consistent with existing visual quality.

10. Air Quality

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Some dust may be generated due to construction traffic, transport, and placement of rock, and general construction activities. A fugitive dust plan would be implemented to control dust generation, if needed. With an appropriate dust control mitigation plan, the project would have minor, temporary impacts to air quality.

11. Noise

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: Some temporary noise may be generated due to construction traffic, transport, and placement of rock, and general construction activities. However, the project is in a relatively remote area, away from highly trafficked recreational sites and concentrated human activity.

12. Human Health and Safety

Potential for Significance: No

Explanation: The project is located in an uninhabited area. The access road contractor would develop a safety plan to protect worker health and safety.

Evaluation of Other Integral Elements

The proposed project would also meet conditions that are integral elements of the categorical exclusion. The project would not:

Threaten a violation of applicable statutory, regulatory, or permit requirements for environment, safety, and health, or similar requirements of DOE or Executive Orders.

Explanation: N/A

Require siting and construction or major expansion of waste storage, disposal, recovery, or treatment facilities (including incinerators) that are not otherwise categorically excluded.

Explanation: N/A

Disturb hazardous substances, pollutants, contaminants, or CERCLA excluded petroleum and natural gas products that preexist in the environment such that there would be uncontrolled or unpermitted releases.

Explanation: N/A

Involve genetically engineered organisms, synthetic biology, governmentally designated noxious weeds, or invasive species, unless the proposed activity would be contained or confined in a manner designed and operated to prevent unauthorized release into the environment and conducted in accordance with applicable requirements, such as those of the Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Institutes of Health.

Explanation: N/A

Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination

Description: BPA has notified and coordinated planned project activities with the USFS Modoc National Forest, BLM, and the private landowners. BPA would continue to coordinate with all stakeholders as necessary during preconstruction planning and the construction phase of the project.

Based on the foregoing, this proposed project does not have the potential to cause significant impacts to any environmentally sensitive resource.

Signed: /s/ Aaron Siemers Date: March 3, 2021
Aaron Siemers, EPR-4
Environmental Protection Specialist